Volume 4, Number 10 October 1995

Freedom Watch

Citizens Project

Feature Article

Persecution Myths

by John Young, editorial page editor, Waco Tribune-Herald newspaper

There are alligators in the sewers. And down there you also might find Ashley Pollack's lunch boxes. And if you happen to see Ashley, tell her some school officials would love to meet her.

In recent months Ashley and the Millcreek Township school district in suburban Erie, Pa., were held up as an example of how public schools trample on religious freedoms.

The story, passed on by syndicated columnist Cal Thomas, was that the fourth grader had purchased and given to two classmates new lunch boxes with the note "God loves you in Christ." The story goes that the girl was reprimanded by her teacher, told, according to Thomas, "she must not write or even speak about religion in school."

It would be an abomination if true. The true abomination is that it's a lie.

A district spokesperson, interviewed by phone, said Ashley Pollack doesn't exist. Or, if real, Ashley never attended Millcreek schools.

Then in Texas there was 5-year-old Shannon. According to the 1992 story passed on by Pat Robertson's "700 Club," she'd been told by her teachers in Kingsville she couldn't say grace over her meal.

One technical problem with that story. Shannon didn't exist. Or if she existed, she didn't attend Kingsville schools. But Kingsville, and all other public schools, took a mighty airwave thrashing.

Concocted incidents purporting to demonstrate how public schools "crush" religious liberties could fill up volumes. Let's commission Paul Dickson. His book, *There are Alligators in Our Sewers*, takes on widespread urban myths. He'd have a field day with what the Religious Right passes on as Gospel.

Should we beware of our school system, or should we beware, as Matthew advises, of false prophets?

The Rev. James Watkins of Old South Church of Christ in Kirkland, Ohio, could write the book. He chases down stories in which students allegedly have been denied the right to pray. His assessment: lies, lies and damned lies.

"When asked by informed investigators," writes Watkins in a recent commentary, those with the wild assertions "are unable to produce one bona fide instance of a student's right to pray being violated by a public school official anywhere."

Advocacy groups like the Rutherford Institute exist to take flimsy allegations to court. Even if frivolous, the suits will still harvest some ink, prestige and financial backing.

In St. Louis, with the involvement of the Rutherford Institute, the Waring School is being sued by a former student who asserts he was punished for praying over his lunch. School officials say plain old misbehavior, not prayer, is the issue. The plaintiff said he has witnesses, but hasn't produced them.

Back in Texas the author of two new laws which made "legal" what was already legal – silent, voluntary school prayers and silent moments that don't solicit prayer – gladly perpetuates the hoax-making.

A press release from the office of state Rep. Al Edwards, D-Houston, proclaims "Prayer is back in our public schools." (Silent, voluntary prayer was never *out* of our schools). It also reads, "A number of people have been reprimanded, suspended and even fired because of their beliefs and participation relating to prayer in public schools."

When asked on the phone to enumerate, Edwards could cite only one example: Waco teacher Linda Thrasher, fired after repeated warnings for clearly and zealously promoting her religion in class. Thrasher's firing was by her own choice. She said she had to abide by God's rules, not those of the school board.

And so the hoaxters go merrily on their way. They make public school the bad guys, anti-God and anti-good, for making the tough calls that come with accommodating a nation of many faiths.

Should we beware of our school system, or should we beware, as Matthew advises, of false prophets? **CP**

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Local Politics

School Board Issues

Elections are coming up this November. Who to elect to the many school boards in this area will be among the choices.

Candidates are already campaigning (even though you may not have met one yet). To help the candidates and the public, Citizens Project will again provide a Candidate Survey. The results will be published October 25 and will be available from Citizens Project and at various locations around town.

In addition, Citizens Project has scheduled three Candidate Forums, as described below. These Forums, to be moderated by the League of Women Voters, will allow questions from the audience and questions by other candidates. We invite and urge you to attend!

What about the issues? Growth, budget, test scores, academic excellence, safety, discipline and order in schools, and the physical condition of schools are current issues in most school districts. However, a few districts have specific issues that promise more excitement.

School District 11. The most important issue is likely to be the bond issue (intertwined with disagreements about past money management). In addition, candidates will campaign about the direction of test scores on standardized tests, the size of the administration, the competency of current leadership and of school board candidates, and school discipline. District 11 holds the promise for some of the nastiest campaigning.

School District 12. Recent issues likely to continue into the campaign include conflicts over multiculturalism in textbooks and the new back-to-basics charter school, which draws many of its students from out-of-district. Interestingly, Citizens Project has been the target of some campaign rhetoric. District 12 holds the promise for some of the most ideological campaigning.

School District 20. The most important issue is likely to be the back-to-basics approach of some candidates versus others who believe that the district should continue to offer a broad-based education. In addition, growth, sex education, and expenditures for special education students will be salient issues. District 20 holds the promise for some of the most emotionally-charged issues.

School board elections are generally genteel, low-key elections. This will be the case for some school district races this year. For other districts, however, this election may bring forth a burst of high passions, dramatic campaigning, and the determination of new educational directions. **CP**

CP Candidate Forums

School District 11	School District 12	School District 20
Fri., Oct. 27, at the Coronado High School auditorium, 1590 West Fillmore.	*Thurs., Oct. 26,* at Cheyenne Mountain Junior High, 1200 West Cheyenne Road.	*Mon., Oct. 30,* at the Rampart High School auditorium, 8250 Lexington Drive.

All Citizens Project Candidate Forums start at 7 p.m. and feature questions from the audience and questions by candidates of other candidates. The League of Women Voters will moderate.

For other candidate forums in your school district, see the Announcements section on page four, and watch your local newspaper.

It's time to get active!

News Briefs

Colorado is number three

The Militia Task Force, a part of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, has issued a report on militia and militia support groups around the nation. Colorado, it reports, has 20–the third highest number in America (trailing California and Michigan). The Task Force list for Colorado includes the American Agricultural Movement, located in Campo. This group recently hosted a forum in Canon City, attended by Sen. Charles Duke of Monument and Colorado for Family Values leader Kevin Tebedo. Of the 73 militia groups nationwide, the Task Force reports, about 45 have ties to the Ku Klux Klan.

Christian Coalition profile

The national Christian Coalition recently released the results of its poll sampling one thousand of its members. The CC profile: older, heavily Protestant and Republican, politically active, more women than men.

More than half the respondents were age 55 or older. Sixty-eight percent said they were Republican, with 20 percent as independents. Only five percent reported themselves to be Democrats, and fully 95 percent wanted someone other than Clinton as the next president. Ninety-eight percent said they were registered to vote and had voted in the last three elections.

Eighty percent of the CC members identified themselves as Protestant, 16 percent as Roman Catholic, and 2 percent as Jewish. Just over 55 percent of the respondents were women. Educationally, the majority had completed high school or vocational school.

Their overriding concern (62 percent) was the perception of America being in a period of moral decline. By comparison, only ten percent picked abortion, the budget deficit or taxes as the most important issue facing the country.

New Coors boycott

The Coors Brewing Company has been boycotted for years by gay and lesbian activists in response to the strong financial support by the Coors family for conservative anti-gay groups. Recently, however, the fundamentalist Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, announced a new boycott against the brewing company. Does this new campaign denounce the evils of drink and the licentiousness of breweries? No, the church's boycott was triggered by the company's decision to extend benefits to the partners of Coors' employees who are gay or lesbian.

Casper attacked

The *Colorado Christian News*, never reluctant to point out the devil in our midst, recently panned the movie *Casper*. Is Casper really the friendly ghost that we read about as children? Not a chance, says author Berit Kjos in the July issue of *CCN*–supernatural beings who are not God's angels can only be demons, "and there are no good demons." Kjos said the movie, although sweet and impressive, is "occult" and designed to "stretch a child's world view to include more pluralistic beliefs." And what about *Casper's* director Steven Spielburg? Kjos says the Bible has the answer: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil."

Focus goes online

Christianity Today reports that Focus on the Family will make its magazine articles and Family News in Focus stories available through America Online. In addition, the magazine reports, "[America Online] subscribers will be able to interact with Focus magazine editors, book authors, and broadcast producers live and through message boards." In becoming more open to today's computer users, Focus will undoubtedly learn more about their views on homosexuality, censorship, the rights of women, and other great moral issues of the day. **CP**

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MICHELANGELO COMPLIES WITH CFV'S NEW STANDARDS.

Dialogue Dinners

Food for Thought

What's new with Dialogue Dinners? Well, a change of name for one thing, and a change of location for another. Changes for the better!

Citizens Project launched Dialogue Dinners in the spring of 1994 with four test groups, then started eight new groups last fall. These groups were made up of six to ten participants, half of whom were self-identified as "orthodox" and half as "progressive." Each group committed to meet a minimum of three times.

Their purpose: to gain greater understanding of those with different viewpoints, to be better understood by others, and to create a comfortable forum for exploring similarities and differences. Most groups met at least five times, and five of these groups are continuing to meet.

Positive feedback

The feedback from participants in these Dialogue Dinner groups has been outstanding. Here are some samples:

- *"Now, I am less inclined to stereotype people and more willing to listen."*
- *"It was very enriching and enlarging intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. And I have some great new friends."*
- *"People are usually not as extreme in their thinking as is portrayed by the media and by people of opposing views."*
- *"We had more points in common than we might have expected."*
- *"As I listened, some of my long-held attitudes began to change, without me compromising my own beliefs."*
- *"We became trusted friends."*

This positive response to the dinners convinced those involved that the program should be expanded throughout our community. However, while feedback from orthodox participants was excellent, the program was not attracting new orthodox interest at the level needed for growth.

An informal group of past participants began to explore ways to be better accessible to more community members. Several changes have emerged from this process, most notably changes in name and structure.

A new organization

"Food for Thought" has become the new name for Dialogue Dinners. A few participants had problems with the word "dialogue." Some felt they should only participate if they could be an articulate advocate for a particular viewpoint, while others felt that dialogue implied two distinct viewpoints when in fact there are many overlapping views.

"Food for Thought" was chosen to be welcoming to different types of participation.

With approval from the Citizens Project Board of Directors, the program has left the CP umbrella. Food for Thought has become an autonomous organization with a 15-member steering committee made up of past participants (8 "orthodox" and 7 "progressive"). This new organization is headquartered in an office donated by NavPress (a division of Navigators), and will continue to be coordinated by Amy Divine.

Future activities

The steering committee is approaching civic, business, religious and media organizations in the region and asking them to promote the gatherings within their organizations or to their constituents. These organizations are also being asked to lend their names as "Community Partners" to the Food for Thought conversation process.

Through our Community Partners, Food for Thought hopes to broaden the reach of the program, and to expand the scope beyond the traditional "orthodox-progressive" issues to include minority and other community concerns.

This is a program prepared for growth. Citizens Project, as a Community Partner, will be distributing brochures about the new Food for Thought program when they are available next month. If you would like to receive additional information and a sign-up form when they are available, please mark and return the response form on page four of this newsletter. **CP**

Why CP Supports Food for Thought

We hear a lot about "culture wars." From our perspective we hear way too much.

The notion of "culture war" implies two distinct sides, exaggerated enemies and a sole victor. It promotes fear and division and makes shared, democratic solutions to community problems almost impossible to reach. It is promoted by those who believe their way is the only way.

Citizens Project is committed to creating community. At a minimum we seek ways to coexist despite our differences.

The discussion process can help us determine when these differences are real and when they are not as extreme, as entrenched or as evil as they may appear from a distance. It is from here, from better understanding our differences and our commonalities, that we can help build a better community.

If you would like to publicly express your support for this process, please mark and return the response box on page four, and we will send you a free "Create Community" bumper sticker. **CP**

CFV Beats Partial Retreat on Community Standards Resolution

By Greg Walta

Back when CFV's campaign for Amendment Two was in its infancy, Will Perkins denied that it was the first of a series of efforts to attack homosexuals in Colorado. "I have only one string in my guitar, and that's Amendment Two," Perkins said. However, Perkins has now discovered a second string in his guitar: the "Community Standards Resolution."

An early version of the Community Standards Resolution was promoted by CFV at its recent Time To Stand meetings around the state. After it and a later revision received bad press and community condemnation, Mr. Tebedo admitted that CFV had made a mistake. "We underestimated the way it would be perceived," he said.

> **"I have only one string in my guitar, and that's Amendment Two," Perkins said.**

CFV then crafted a third version, which was announced by Kevin Tebedo at his August news conference in Colorado Springs.

CFV's standards

This latest version condemns pornography, violence, homosexuality and the breakdown of the nuclear family. It calls upon elected representatives to support CFV's standards and to oppose policies which are "repugnant" to those standards. But what standards does CFV propose?

The standards set forth in CFV's resolution range from mere platitudes to a troubling effort to encourage local governments to meddle in people's private lives and choices. Here is a summary:

Pornography. While any good citizen would agree that "pornography" is bad for our citizens, the problem has always been defining what pornography is. CFV's standards propose a new and open-ended definition. Pornography, says CFV, should "include but not be limited to definitions by federal and state laws." Few citizens would be comfortable with allowing Will Perkins and Kevin Tebedo to serve as a two-man censorship committee to determine what books will be read and what movies will be shown in Colorado Springs.

Violence. Every good citizen is opposed to violence. Society has expressed its opposition to violence through stiffer prison terms, more prison beds, more police and the almost universal condemnation of violence from its political and religious leaders. CFV's resolution on violence adds nothing to these efforts, except to stigmatize children from "broken families" who CFV blames for most of the violence.

Homosexuality. The standard says "the rights and privileges accorded citizenship do not extend to the behavior of homosexuality. Our community must unconditionally advocate heterosexuality only, through our institutions and policies." This, of course, is an extension of Amendment Two's effort to make non-citizens of gays and lesbians. Indeed, CFV's August letter to its supporters says that gay rights issues are the reason for having the resolution at all.

> **Few would be comfortable with Will Perkins and Kevin Tebedo as a two-man censorship committee for Colorado Springs.**

Preservation of family. CFV's standard calls on the government to put all its influence and resources behind preservation of the nuclear family, "defined as a male and female, morally and legally united as husband and wife; extending to any children of the union and relations." The standard does not explain what it wants government to do about single mothers, children from "broken homes" or others who fail to meet CFV's strict moral standards.

The reception

Thankfully, CFV's proposed standards resolution has received a cold reception from many civic and governmental leaders and, thus far, an indifferent reception from the public.

- The *Gazette Telegraph* opposed CFV's resolution because it "invites government intervention in areas of life where it does not belong and needlessly dredges up the debate over issues such as Amendment 2."
- City councilwoman Cheryl Gillaspie observed, "I don't think it's appropriate because God spoke to Moses, not to me. I'm not that anointed."
- News reports are that the public's response to CFV's petition drive has been "so-so," and that CFV has extended its petition drive to March in order to get enough signatures.

When the Community Standards Resolution was first announced, CFV promised to pressure local governing bodies to adopt the resolution in El Paso, Larimer, Mesa, Pueblo and Archuleta counties. In the face of near unanimous opposition, CFV beat a hasty (but only partial) retreat.

Instead of seeking to have governmental bodies adopt the resolution, CFV announced in August that it would merely "present" the signatures endorsing the resolution to city councils, school boards and county commissioners as an appeal from constituents. CFV would then urge local representatives to "keep in mind these standards" when making decisions.

Peace no more

The citizens of Colorado Springs have been enjoying some quiet while Amendment Two works its way through the judicial system. With the arrival of the Community Standards Resolution, it is clear that CFV will not allow this city to enjoy civic peace until we rise up and with one voice make it clear that we are tired of CFV's divisive agenda. Based on recent developments, there are signs of hope.

If you would like to publicly express your opposition to CFV's new campaign, please mark and return the response box on page four, and we will send you a free "Celebrate Diversity" bumper sticker! **CP**

Legal Updates

School prayer amendment stalls

What's become of the constitutional amendment on school prayer? The amendment idea was launched in a blaze of publicity by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (as described in the February 1995 *Freedom Watch)* and strongly supported by Focus on the Family (see our June *Freedom Watch).* If approved by Congress and ratified by the states, the school prayer amendment would alter the First Amendment to our Constitution, and would, among other things, allow our government to promote religion or particular religions.

However, the proposed amendment then dropped from sight.

What has happened is that interested conservative groups have not been able to agree on the language for the amendment. Some religious conservatives have even started to suggest that the goal of school prayer must be achieved through legislative enactments.

In the meantime, People for the American Way has put together a comprehensive social and legal analysis of the school prayer and school prayer amendment issues. Copies are available from Citizens Project for $2 to cover copying; if you are interested, please mark and return the response box on page 4.

More help on religion in schools

President Clinton recently ordered the Department of Education to send a four-page set of guidelines on public school religious activities to the nation's 15,000 school districts. These guidelines drew heavily on an earlier 18-point agreement on legally permissible religious activities in schools, which was signed by 35 organizations across the political spectrum, including the Christian Legal Society.

Other Christian advocacy organizations, like the Rutherford Institute, condemned the agreement and later guidelines because they did not promote more religious speech and activities in public schools.

To help insure that more people understand the rights of, and limits to, religious speech and activities in public schools, Citizens Project will be sending copies of these guidelines to school administrators in our area.

Free Bibles bring lawsuit

When school officials agree to let outside groups place boxes of Bibles in public schools for school children, what do they get? Why, sued of course! A school board in Clarksburg, West Virginia, is being sued by the American Civil Liberties Union for those very actions. The school board is being defended by the Rutherford Institute, which claims that these boxes of Bibles were appropriate and constitutional religious expressions by private citizens.

The Rutherford Institute has not indicated whether it would apply the same principles and rally to the defense of Buddhists or Mormons who might leave boxes of their religious literature for public school children (in the unlikely event that school officials would approve). Such a case involving "heathen" books might bring forth a different Rutherford concern, that providing such books would constitute a persecution of devout Christians who desire to control the religious upbringing of their children.

Get welfare, get God

U.S. Senators Bob Dole and John Ashcroft have sponsored a provision in the pending welfare reform bill that would funnel welfare benefits through churches. While church organizations have been used in the past as providers of government welfare services, they were required to maintain religious neutrality as they delivered the services. However, the Dole-Ashcroft provision, if it becomes law, would permit churches to provide worship and religious instruction as they deliver those benefits.

Many church groups oppose this provision, fearing it would foster unhealthy competition among proselytizing churches for government dollars, subject poor people to preaching as a condition of receiving benefits, and severely erode the concepts of religious freedom and separation of church and state.

Further, it would put our government in the position of discriminating among religions, as it decides which churches or church organizations should benefit by providing these governmental benefits. As one critic puts it, "It is hard to imagine a Mormon church winning a welfare grant in Biloxi, Miss. – or a Southern Baptist church winning one in Salt Lake City." **CP**

Racism and Hate

Interested in racism, anti-Semitism, and the Neo-Nazi movement?
Worried about hate groups in our state?
November 15, 7 p.m., Palmer Hall at Colorado College
Mark your calendars!

See the Announcements section for details

Announcements

School board candidate surveys

The Citizens Project school board candidate survey is underway. The questions have been sent out to the school board candidates. You will see the results in our insertion in the Oct. 25 issue of *The Independent*. The survey will also be sent directly to those CP supporters who are signed up to receive *Freedom Watch*. Additional copies will be available at locations throughout our community and at the Citizens Project office (31 East Platte). The school board election is **Nov. 7;** it promises to be lively and interesting.

School board candidate forums

Citizens Project will hold three Candidate Forums. Details are on the front page of this newsletter.

Other Meet the Candidate nights are scheduled in School District 20. These forums, sponsored by the District 20 PTA, are **Tues., Oct. 24,** at Eagle View Middle School; **Wed., Oct. 25,** at Challenger Middle School; and **Thurs., Oct. 26,** at Timberview Middle School. All begin at 7 p.m.

Learn about ballot issues

The El Paso Democratic Club is hosting a public discussion about issues on the November ballot. Participants include: School District 11 Superintendent Dr. Ken Burnley (on the school bond issue), Colorado Springs Police Chief John Taggert (issues dealing with the sheriff's department), attorney Larry Skiffington (on open space), Library Director Bernard Margolis (on the library's requested increase), and Maurice Rahimi of the Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments (on the proposed sales tax increase to upgrade Interstate 25). The discussion will begin at 7 p.m. **Tues., Oct. 3,** at the Hillside Community Center (corner of Institute and Fountain).

"Faces of Hate"

Citizens Project will sponsor a presentation and panel discussion on "Faces of Hate: Global Racism and Local Impact." The speakers are Floyd Cochran, a former member of the Aryan Nation; Leonard Zeskind, an expert on far-right racist and anti-Semitic social movements; and Graeme Atkinson, an expert on the neo-Nazi movement in Europe. Atkinson is also editor of *Searchlight*, a London-based anti-fascist magazine.

These three will speak about international and national racist movements and their impact on local communities. This important presentation will begin 7 p.m. **Wed., Nov. 15,** in Palmer Hall's Gates Common Room at Colorado College. **CP**

Inside CP

New board members join CP

Citizens Project is pleased to announce the addition of four new members to our Board of Directors: Christine Beserra, a librarian with the Pikes Peak Library District and volunteer librarian for CP; Sharon Friedman, associate editor of *Springs Magazine;* Joanne Peterson, a critical care nurse at Porter Hospital and the volunteer Sustaining Partners Coordinator for Citizens Project; and Richard Van Scotter, vice-president at Junior Achievement and instructor at UCCS.

Welcome aboard – there is much we can do!

CP welcomes intern

We are excited to have Aimee Cox on board to help coordinate the Citizens Project school board candidate survey and candidate forums. Aimee brings a wealth of experience to the project. She has worked with Americorps as a member and assistant program coordinator, served as a team leader for the Youth Volunteer Corps, and established an agency to provide advocacy and educational activities to low income families. She is currently a student at the UCCS Graduate School of Public Affairs.

Focus groups

CP board member Bruce Loeffler hosted a successful Focus Group on Wednesday, Sept. 6. Focus Groups provide an opportunity for Citizens Project to hear from supporters and volunteers. They also offer a small group setting to discuss local issues and effective ways to address them. Focus Groups will be held the first Wednesday of each month. If you are interested in participating, please mark and return the response box below.

CP in the news

Citizens Project and its founder Amy Divine were featured in an Associated Press story. AP reporter John King traveled through 18 states to experience the local issues facing America. He came to Citizens Project, where he spoke with Amy. His article highlights Dialogue Dinners (now Food for Thought). The article appeared in many newspapers around the nation – most recently in the Sept. 17 *Gazette Telegraph*.

Other media contacts by CP personnel include conversations and interviews with reporters from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Rocky Mountain News*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and our local TV station KKTV.

Office warming party

We would like to thank those CP supporters and volunteers who came to our office warming and open house on Sun., Sept. 17. If you missed us then, please feel free to drop by our new office at 31 East Platte (on the second floor of the Park Place office building, above Listen Up). **CP**

❑ I would like to take part in a Citizens Project Focus Group

❑ I would like to receive a Food for Thought brochure *(when available)*

Available for suggested donations	Available for free
○ Prayer in school report (by PFAW) – $2	○ "Create Community" bumper sticker
○ "Celebrate Diversity, Create Community" mug – $5*	○ "Celebrate Diversity" bumper sticker
○ Citizens Project T-shirt – $14* (specify size)	○ September issue of *Freedom Watch*

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Thank you for your support. Please note contributions are tax deductible.

Our Mission: Citizens Project is a grassroots organization in the Pikes Peak region dedicated to upholding the traditional American values of pluralism, freedom of religion and separation of church and state.

Citizens Project

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